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ABSTRACT

The Riverside Unified School District, Riverside (California) experienced desegregation in ways that many school districts experienced it in the 1960s. It became the first city of its size (over 100,000) to implement a full-scale racial balance plan and implement it within 7 weeks. This study examines the successes and failures of desegregation through the eyes of those most heavily influenced by it, the students and families who participated at the inception of Riverside's desegregation. The extent of parent participation and parent attitudes about participation in the school system were studied through archival documents, review of previous studies, and 39 interviews with key personnel and interested parties including parents and involved community members. Findings indicate that parents from both majority and minority families were surveyed at the time of desegregation, but they were not included in the actual decision-making process. School personnel and parents agreed that parents were invited to participate in their children's new schools, but neither majority nor minority parents felt welcome at the new school, and most felt it was too far for them to go to participate. Parents generally thought that the experience had been beneficial for students, and they generally thought that their lack of participation had not been detrimental to their children's success because the desegregation allowed greater opportunities for later success. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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PARENT/SCHOOL RELATIONS IN CRISIS: REVISITING DESEGREGATION IN RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

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PARENT/SCHOOL RELATIONS IN CRISIS: REVISITING DESEGREGATION IN RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

by
Susan Clark Studer

Few people would disagree that parents are the first educators of the young. From the time of birth until well into adult years, parents teach, train and otherwise influence their children in many ways. But, it must be remembered that, a parent's role as educator does not end when the child's formal schooling begins. Many researchers have, for decades, studied and written on the importance of the parent in a child's school and later life's successes (Epstein, 1995, 1992, 1990, 1987, 1982; Swap, 1993; Henderson, 1987; and others). One result of this effort has been the recent encouragement, as part of school restructuring, of inviting parents into the classroom setting and decision-making (Henderson, 1986).

But parent involvement in schools, although it can help bring about student success, could not overcome the inequality experienced by students being enrolled in historically segregated schools. Ten years following the Supreme Court ruling, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), concerning the "inherent" inequality of separate but equal schools, the government put teeth into their decision by encouraging financially the support of integrated schools with desegregation in the 1960's. Desegregation was needed to insure success for all students on a more equitable basis.

In spite of much pro-parent information, school administrators and personnel admit that there are difficulties involved with inviting community members into the classroom, that parent involvement is a mixed blessing (Studer, 1995; Epstein & Becker, 1982). The result is, that although school personnel may invite and sincerely encourage parents into the schooling process, there are times when parents are not welcome, not only because the presence of an "outsider" can be disturbing to young students, but because it can create discomfort for teachers. It is possible that a parent's presence may hinder the process of educating his or her child or other children in the classroom. This tension of parent involvement/hinderance can be accentuated during times of crisis which may require that school personnel "close the doors" to outsiders (parents) in order for the system to be able to function (Ogawa & Studer, 1996).

During times of crisis, dissension also creates problems which may slow decision making and ultimately the functioning of the organization (Scott, 1992; Thompson, 1967). In any organization there may be a time when it is better not to ask for the opinions of others, especially when time is at a premium, when solutions must be found within a limited time frame. Racial desegregation was a time of turmoil across the nation. With the onset of financial support being bound to racially mixed schools and outspoken groups clamoring for immediate action, decisions had to be made quickly, and dissension and/or too many decision

makers in the process could have exacerbated the problem. This crisis was accentuated in Riverside, California when incidences occurred quickly which required that decisions had to be made immediately (Hendrick, 1968).

The Riverside Unified School District (Riverside, California) experienced desegregation similar to that which many school districts experienced in the 1960's. Financially it behooved the district to incorporate racially balanced schools, while at the same time, minority parents were increasingly becoming more vocal concerning the needs (and unmet needs) of their children. Riverside's unique method of solving these problems and the resultant short time required for implementation of a plan, brought distinction to the district and praise from educational organizations. Riverside became the first school system in a city whose population exceeded 100,000, whose school enrollment kindergarten through grade twelve surpassed 20,000 students, to develop a full-scale racial balance plan and to implement this plan within seven weeks. The implementation of this (desegregation) plan, which included the full integration of minority students (primarily Black and Hispanic) into previously White schools, saw the closing of two segregated schools in one year, a third school closing a year later, and students bussed, in fairly equal proportion, to schools throughout the district (Hendrick, 1968).

In the forty years since desegregation, at least two generations of school children have experienced the effects of desegregation and its resultant changes in schools in Riverside and across the nation. Since Brown v. Board of Education, Brown II, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, schools have moved students, instituted major curriculum changes and impacted families and communities in ways that no other legal or legislative decisions have done. Inarguably, school desegregation was the major social policy of the 1960's (Miller, 1995; Rossell & Hawley, 1983; Hawley, 1981; Crain, 1968; and others).

Research informs us that parents play a crucially important role in their children's lives, not only as caretakers, but in school success as well. Current debate exists over the virtue of communities claiming ownership of neighborhood schools, which may result in the future resegregation of school districts.

Current debate also focuses on ballot initiatives which call for the rescinding of affirmative action practices which may indirectly affect where students go to school and future options for individuals. Clearly, the climate for school integration is different today from what it was thirty years ago. Communities and some minority groups are asking for community schools of high quality because they realize that the role of the family and the community are important in a child's school success. However, some of these groups may be overlooking the impact that desegregation has had on opportunities for minorities.

Thirty years ago desegregation was justified on legal, moral and educational grounds. Setting aside the legal and moral

imperatives to ending racial segregation in the schools, the importance of this work is to produce some limited insight about whether or not, on a balance, the experiences for children and parents was a positive one. And if it was positive thirty years ago, is it still positive today? There are those who believe that advocates of desegregation may have been unduly hopeful or naive concerning the full integration of minority children into schools, claiming that desegregation did not end the segregation of students within desegregated schools. In addition to moral and legal issues, school districts across the nation are seeking to find answers to the problem of "White flight" which leaves communities with few White families to attend their schools.

Coupled with these issues is the issue of district courts who, in recent years, appear to be rescinding previous decisions in favor of desegregation. In Missouri, with the escalating costs of desegregation, busing, and compensatory education plans, proponents of desegregation continue to fight the battle to save these programs in times of economic troubles. Missouri v. Jenkins[1] and similar subsequent cases in Indianapolis will continue to make a difference in how schools approach minority problems in the future of Missouri and elsewhere.

There are those who might argue that desegregation has not accomplished what it set out to nearly a half of a century ago, and there are those who feel that the meager results may have not been worth the problems that ensued (Hawley, 1995; Neuborne, 1995). Still others claim that Black children may have been better off in community schools rather than transferred out of their neighborhoods to unfamiliar places and unwelcome faces across towns. Debates continue which claim that segregation still exists in schools under the guise of tracking (Oakes,1985). Certainly it can be argued that desegregation caused concern for minority parents helplessly watching their small children getting on buses and traveling to unfamiliar destinations, destinations out of their neighborhood and out of their control.

Little, if any, information can be found on the parent involvement of minority children in desegregated schools. This historical study contributes to filling that gap in the literature as it surveys parent involvement during a period of crisis in American history to see if and how parents were included in the process and what the results of that involvement was or might have been. In understanding the role of parents during a crisis period it is also important to find if and how parents were involved in the process whether as decisionmakers or bystanders, how they were incorporated into the new setting and whether the process was beneficial for the children who were uprooted.

For those who feel that parent involvement is an important part of a child's education, the reader will discover what took place in the mid-1960's in a desegregated school district in Riverside, California. To understand what occurred, this study surveys those individuals involved: district and university personnel, parents and children of families involved and members

of the local community and asks these questions:
1. How were parents involved in the desegregation decision making process both before and after implementation of the plan?
2. Were parents invited to be involved in the new school to which their children were assigned? If so, how were they invited? If not, why not?
3. Was the experience a pleasant or an unpleasant one for parents?
4. Did their involvement or lack of involvement impact their child's school success or future successes?
5. Whether or not they were involved in the education of their child, did that involvement increase or decrease with desegregation?
6. If given the opportunity to live through this period again, would parents choose to send their children to schools out of the neighborhood or would they fight for a different plan?

Although there may be times when it is necessary to discourage parent participation in order to get the job done, discouragement may be achieved at a cost. Where desegregation appears to have been a positive move toward accomplishing school (and later life) successes for minority children, the addition of parental involvement, if the literature is correct, could have led to even more success. If either desegregation or parent involvement by itself is a positive source for school achievement, clearly, it seems, that desegregation plus parent involvement would have been better together than either minus the other. If parental involvement is important, then the cost of not including parents may have been paid by the students who were not given an optimum opportunity to succeed if their parents were not part of the process and by the parents if they were not able to contribute or partake in the process of the child's education. Though we may never know what children in desegregated schools could have achieved with parent help, or whether they may have been better off remaining in their own neighborhoods, that is not the focus of this study.

The value of historical research, according to Wiersma (1991), is that it provides an understanding of the past through accurate description "providing perspectives for decision making and policy formation" (p.205). Although this study does not presume to recommend policy changes, with new issues forming around affirmative action and resegregation, it is hoped that in the future the voices of those involved: the community, the parents, and the children will be invited in to become a part of the process of change and encouraged to stay in the process as it proceeds. If communities opt for resegregation, parents and children will not only be a part of that decision but a factor in its implementation and continued success.

This study examines the success and failures of desegregation through the eyes of those who were most heavily influenced by it, the students and families required to participate in the process during its inception.

School desegregation was a major social policy of the

1960's. For a whole generation it impacted schools, communities and the nation. Today we see a more integrated society, with Blacks and other minorities living in communities from which they were previously denied, and young people given more opportunities in which to succeed both in and out of school.

Although we know that parents were a part of, and were impacted by, desegregation, it is the purpose of this study to shed light on their actual involvement in the public schools at the time of desegregation.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection. To determine how the relationship between parents and school personnel was hindered or maintained and whether parents were included in the decision-making and schooling process during desegregation in Riverside, data was collected in three forms.

1. Archival documents (in the forms of newspaper accounts, school documents, and personal correspondence).
2. Previous documented information collected by scholars (university studies, dissertations, taped interviews and surveys collected over the past thirty years).
3. Thirty nine interviews with key personnel and interested parties (including but not limited to school administrators, school personnel, parents and involved community members).

Site Selection. The uniqueness and yet the universality of the desegregation process in the Riverside Unified School District makes the selection of this site important in the study of parent involvement in schools during crisis situations. The remarkably short time in which the integration plan was implemented and the reported success of the implementation of the plan made this situation unique. But Riverside also experienced the nation-wide problems of race relations, decades of unfair and unequal treatment of minorities, and residents unwilling to accept change. Tension and volatile personal feelings existed in Riverside as they did at sites throughout the nation. In addition to this uniqueness/universality, the presence of numerous follow-up studies documenting the desegregation experiences, and the ample number of key inhabitants still residing in the Riverside area created a site rich with information.

Participants. In order to understand the role of parents in Riverside desegregation a sample of parents of children who attended Lowell, Irving and Casablanca Schools were interviewed. Participants in the study also included a former district superintendent, board members, school principals, teachers and classified staff. Members of the community interviewed included not only parents but former students, members of the Urban League, Settlement House, NAACP, the press reporter who covered the story, and other active community organizations. Individuals whose names appeared in school documents, board minutes,

newspaper articles and histories of the area were also included in the interview process.

A timeline was developed for maximum coverage of the topic. Interviewing began with active community members and reporter who gave not only their interpretations of the topic but who were able to identify the location of parents and former students. Upon culmination of parent and student interviews, school staff, administrators and board members were given an opportunity to reflect on their interpretations of the parent involvement process.

When dealing with sensitive issues, the historian's hope is that memories remain accurate over the years that have ensued since the incident. A possible limitation of this study is that memories may have changed. A more likely limitation was possibly the inability to locate individuals whose interviews and opinions differed from those received and who would add important elements to the analysis of the subject. In the past thirty years, through death or simply losing track, Riverside has lost several of the key individuals of this study. Yet, with these limitations accounted for, many people do continue to live in the area and hold rich memories of the events before, during and after desegregation in Riverside. A sincere effort was made to include all opinions by interviewing both males and females, individuals whose ages ranged from mid-thirties to eighty-seven-years-old and including Hispanic, Black and White views of the issue.

Why Historical/Qualitative?. An historical analysis gives a descriptive view of an incidence, while, according to Wiersma (1991), the purpose of qualitative research is to understand social phenomenon (Wiersma, 1991).

> (H)istorical research is a systematic process of describing, analyzing, and interpreting the past based on information from selected sources as they relate to the topic under study (p.203).

The incorporation of qualitative research methods with historical research is intended to provide the study with both perspective and personal experience. The purpose of qualitative research is "seeing rather than mere looking," with an "enlightened eye." Qualitative research also allows for the "voice" of the people who are being studied to be heard, while the study's historical aspect allows that voice to be heard in proper perspective. Therefore, to discover this social phenomenon, qualitative/historical research was used.

RESULTS

The results showed that: 1) Although parents from both minority and majority families had been surveyed at the time and their opinions were taken into consideration, they were not included in the actual decision-making process. 2) School

personnel and parents, alike, agreed that parents were invited and encouraged to participate at their children's new schools (In fact, a major effort was made to invite parents into the new schools). 3) Although the effort was made to include them, both minority and White parents did not feel welcome at the new school to which their child was assigned and in most cases felt that the school was too far for them to actively participate. 4) The experience, however unpleasant, was considered beneficial for the children involved by parents, staff, and students. 5) The parents did not feel that their absence at the new school was detrimental to their child's success because they still encouraged and helped their children at home and the desegregation process allowed for greater opportunities for the children's later successes. 6) If given the opportunity to make the decision to desegregate again, although parents, staff, and students would prefer the two-way busing of children into their segregated schools to maintain the neighborhood schools and the community (most people felt that the neighborhood lost its sense of community when the schools were closed), they agreed that something needed to be done to provide equal opportunity to minority children and the plan worked.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Missouri V. Jenkins, 807F.2D 657. 683 (8th Cir. 1986) Affirmed in part and remanded, 110 S.Ct. 1651 (1990). Appealed and reversed, 115 S.Ct. 2038 (1995).

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